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Enhancing Augmentative and Alternative Communication Use through Collaborative Planning  
and Peer Modelling

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of

Educational Psychology

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## AAC CONVENTIONS

Please note: When describing an interaction where both spoken language and speech output from an AAC system occurred, the following conventions were used:

Spoken language: italicised, quotations marks, e.g. *“Do you have anything to share?”*

Speech output from AAC system: italicised, no quotations marks, e.g. *I went to snow.*



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## ABSTRACT

Communication difficulties are a core feature of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). It is estimated that 30-50% of children and adults with ASD do not develop sufficient spoken language to meet their daily communication needs. As well as difficulties with producing spoken language, children with ASD exhibit challenges with social-communication, for example, they may use a limited range of communicative functions and/or have difficulty initiating and responding to social interactions.

For children who have difficulty producing spoken language, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems can provide an accessible and functional means of communication. In order for children who are learning to use AAC to become competent communicators, they must have frequent exposure to high quality language interactions with skilled communication partners. While there is an evidence base showing that behavioural, requesting focussed interventions can be effective in some circumstances for children with ASD, concerns about generalisability, and the lack of socio-communicative focus have led to calls for more naturalistic, social communication interventions.

This study focused on investigating ways of supporting a child's social communication using AAC within an interactional activity in the natural environment of his classroom. A descriptive case-study design was used to document the implementation of a four-phase, peer-mediated AAC intervention in an inclusive classroom. The focus was on social communication, and the intervention was developed and enacted in a collaborative partnership with the classroom teacher.

In conducting this study, multiple sources of data, including interviews, observations, and data from an AAC system, were collated and analysed. From this analysis, three key themes emerged: a) enhanced participation, b) creation of a communicably accessible environment, and c) increased teacher agency. These themes suggest positive outcomes for a naturalistic, social-communication intervention, adding to the calls for further research development in this area.